



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Democratic Elections

As prepared for delivery by Paul DeGregorio
Vice Chair, U.S. Election Assistance Commission
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, September 19, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As President Bush declared earlier this year, it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions around the world. Accordingly, we urge all participating States to put into practice our common commitment to “build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of our nations.”

Since 2000, the United States has embarked on a serious path of reforming the process of conducting its elections and improving our democratic system. The Help America Vote Act of 2002, which is referenced several times in the OSCE/ODHIR report on the 2004 U.S. general election, represented a major step in that direction. Indeed, the creation of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission – of which I serve as Vice Chair – by that Act represents an important commitment by the U.S. government to promote improvements in our electoral process. The debate over further improvements continues in Washington and throughout America.

The United States has consistently welcomed the observation missions of the OSCE. We value highly OSCE/ODHIR’s expertise. The U.S. Government welcomes the constructive recommendations made by the OSCE. We certainly hope that they will continue.

We are pleased that OSCE/ODHIR has accepted our invitation to conduct a follow-up visit to discuss its report on the 2004 election. We hope to receive Ambassador Strohal and his team later this year.

As one who has served as an OSCE election observer in several countries, I know first-hand the careful and fair approach that is used by the OSCE/ODHIR and OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to formulate their reports and recommendations. It is important that the OSCE be able to continue its elections work unhindered in years to come.

Over the past two years, manifestations of popular sovereignty in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan occurred because the people of these countries demanded their leaders’ adherence to OSCE commitments and to the principles of freedom and democracy. These citizens said “enough” to fraudulent elections. Moreover, the fraudulent elections that provoked these events bore witness to the importance of thorough and objective election observation.

With this in mind, I would like to highlight elements of the “Resolution on Improving the Implementation of OSCE Electoral Standards and Commitments and the Effectiveness of OSCE Election Observation Activities,” adopted in Washington by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly on July 5. The Parliamentary Assembly:

- acknowledged the “internationally accepted merit of OSCE election training and monitoring;”
- accepted the “pre-eminence of the methodology of OSCE election observation missions;” and
- confirmed that “OSCE election observer missions – using objective, unbiased principles freely accepted by all participating States – have played a valuable role in the monitoring of free and fair elections in the OSCE.”

The Assembly also noted with concern that the most urgent election-related topic today is the implementation of OSCE commitments and called on all our governments to fully abide by them.

Ukraine’s presidential elections were a demonstration of what can happen when corrupt authorities fail to hold elections that reflect the will of the people. The desire for democratic elections sparked the Orange Revolution. The 2004 Ukrainian election cycle also demonstrates that a country can make rapid and dramatic progress in meeting its OSCE election-related commitments when its authorities demonstrate political will. In contrast, Belarus’ parliamentary elections and referendum to end presidential term limits were a testament to the Belarusian Government’s cynical contempt for its OSCE election commitments. The conduct of these elections failed to ensure the fundamental conditions necessary to ensure that the will of the people serves as the basis for the authority of government.

The July 3 parliamentary elections in Albania undoubtedly marked improvement over past elections in that country. We were impressed with the largely professional and transparent efforts of the Central Election Commission. While improvement from past elections is commendable, this does not constitute an assessment that these elections were free and fair. OSCE observers noted a variety of technical problems that still need to be addressed and continued electoral reform is clearly needed.

The July 10 presidential election in Kyrgyzstan was a landmark in Central Asia. The U.S. Delegation congratulates President Bakiyev and all of Kyrgyzstan on its historic accomplishment. Virtually all observers agreed that the vote featured marked improvements over the previous elections and demonstrated that elections that represent the will of the people are possible in Central Asia, when authorities want to conduct them. Of course, there is also a need for continued reform. We urge the Kyrgyz authorities to work closely with ODIHR to implement additional electoral reforms, so that future elections fully meet OSCE standards. As Head of the Election Observation Mission Ambassador Kopaj said, "I urge the authorities not to lose momentum, now that we have seen what can be achieved in such a short timeframe."

Looking forward to elections on the horizon, preparations for November’s parliamentary ballot in Azerbaijan and December’s presidential ballot in Kazakhstan are being closely monitored by the international community. We hope that Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan will

take the necessary steps to ensure the upcoming elections will be seen inside and outside their respective countries as fully meeting OSCE commitments. In both cases, this requires allowing opposition candidates and parties to participate on an equal basis, including equal media access, with incumbents or pro-government parties. It also requires balanced and impartial electoral commissions and transparency. Impartial observers will also play an important role.

In the case of Azerbaijan, we urge the government to ensure that the violence that accompanied the October 2003 election is not repeated. Accountability for the excessive use of force by law enforcement in October 2003 would be a positive step in advance of this November's elections. In the run-up to Kazakhstan's December vote, we urge the government to implement ODIHR's recommendations from the fall 2004 parliamentary elections report. This report indicated that, while the September 2004 balloting showed some improvement over previous elections, it still fell short of OSCE commitments and featured numerous irregularities. President Nazarbayev should uphold his pledge to hold democratic elections, which includes personally making clear to regional leaders that they must abide by elections law and refrain from using administrative resources to influence the process.

Mr. Chairman, the events of the last two years clearly demonstrate that long-term stability is possible only through democracy. If voters feel their voice is ignored or votes have been stolen, they will find other ways to seek redress for their election grievances. So-called stability resulting from rigged elections that keep current rulers in power is an illusion. All states have a vital interest in seeing to it that their elections conform to OSCE standards.

Thank you.